

The Chicago Tribune

Discovering Columbus

Ohio's little giant is more than just a one-sport town

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Chicago Tribune

Published October 15, 2006

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- People might suppose that an Ohio State game at Ohio Stadium--the famed "Horseshoe"--would grind the town to a halt.

Columbus isn't a town, however; it's a city big enough to keep its enthusiasms separated, so that even when 100,000-plus fans converge in one area, plenty more thousands of residents go to lots of places somewhere else.

We put Columbus in this series with the Omahas and Toledos mostly because it lacks an American major-league sports franchise: no NBA basketball, no MLB baseball, no NFL football. It does have a National Hockey League team, but the way we parse it, Canadian sports don't count. And it does have the Columbus Crew soccer team, one indication of the city's ethnic diversity but no deal breaker.

So here we have Columbus with a population close to 730,000--a city larger, by that measure, than Boston, Cleveland, Las Vegas or Seattle, to name a few examples--ranking 15th in the U.S.

And yet...the Cubs, Sox, Bulls and Bears can't play a Columbus home team. And yet...the Chicago Tribune stylebook insists we say "Columbus, Ohio" in the dateline, while smaller cities, such as Des Moines and Akron, are considered so well known they can stand by themselves.

Of course, a lot of American towns bear the name Columbus--usually as a nod to Chris, who never set foot in any of them. The city grew so large partly because of an annexation binge that began in the 1990s. One result is that the most visitor-visible parts appear fresh and untroubled. Downtown glistens with clean-cut office buildings, a handsome statehouse and an impressive main library edifice. The Easton Town Center shopping complex out near the airport looks as pristine as Disney World. The Center of Science and Industry (COSI) on the Scioto River has grown into a space-age tubular structure for its array of hands-on wonders. That zoo made so famous by frequent talk-show guest Jack Hanna has gotten all leafy and naturalistic. (Hanna may be graying, but he still puts on a lively show, whether at the Columbus Zoo outdoor pavilion or on late-night TV.)

And yet the old things still peek through. Settlers were piecing the city together as early as 1812, which means a lot of neighborhoods still hang on to a bit of 19th Century ambience.

I made my first stop on my first visit to the city in the neighborhood called Short North. It's north of downtown and a fairly short distance from the Ohio State University campus, thus the name. In the days before gentrification, police radios crackled with "Short-North" pretty often. Starting in the 1970s and '80s, urban pioneers took to renovating the tenements and rundown houses, pacifying formerly crime-ridden streets. Restaurants and galleries sprouted along a stretch of High Street, giving it a slightly chic and oh-so-hip vibe.

For example, when I approached my bed-and-breakfast, 50 Lincoln Inn, a wall next to the alley near the inn's parking area had been painted with a startling reproduction of the Mona Lisa--reclining and smiling a vertical smile.

This little section of town is known as Italian Village, so the super-sized Mona Lisa makes sense in an odd sort of way. But how to explain the mural on a wall at Lincoln and High Street: "American Gothic" with the woman's head upside down?

There were other murals: a George Bellows (native son) reproduction depicting bohemian life, a giant blowup of Van Gogh's "Cafe Terrace at Night," life-size trompe l'oeil locomotives and train stations,

plus many more. Nothing hugely significant, just local artists having some fun with commissions from building owners eager to emphasize Short North's artsy cachet.

On High Street, I saw only one red-and-gray Ohio State banner hanging from a flagpole outside a bar.

The downtown game face appears slightly south of Short North, where serious commerce and industry happens along with a big dollop of culture. One afternoon, office workers hustled past the massive Convention Center to eat lunch at North Market, one of those wonderful urban souks filled with butchers, bakers, farm produce, fresh fish and local color. I watched the customers forage for awhile and then walked toward the heavily touted Arena District.

The most obvious presence in that part of downtown is Nationwide Insurance ("life comes at you fast"), which not only has its world headquarters at the corner of High and Nationwide Boulevard but its name on Nationwide Arena, the anchor for a spanking-new bar/restaurant/nightclub/office/apartment-loft complex.

Of course, the way cities tend to develop these days, architects tried to make the Arena District buildings look old, or they adapted old buildings to new uses. Whatever, they do add some life to a town center that already was doing a lot with what it had.

A few blocks farther south, the Ohio, Palace and Southern Theatres have all been polished to the glow they gave off in their original heyday as vaudeville and movie venues. Now they keep the downtown open at night with Broadway road shows, the Columbus Symphony Orchestra, the Columbus Jazz Orchestra, ProMusica Chamber Orchestra, Ballet Met and Columbus Gay Men's Chorus.

A lot of other theater companies and musical ensembles light up stages around town. Opera Columbus, for instance, performs in the Merson Auditorium of the Wexner Center for the Arts on the Ohio State campus. Wexner is a strange but appealing architectural mixture of white framework, sheet glass and bulky, castle-like structures. Inside, find traveling art exhibits, theater performances, film exhibitions and anything else that falls into the category of visual and performing arts. The center, opened in 1989, is named for Harry L. Wexner, father of major donor Leslie H. Wexner, chief of The Limited, a Columbus-based clothing, bath and beauty-products empire.

Wexner Center represents a genteel aspect of the gargantuan Ohio State campus (some 58,000 students). I visited the university two days before the football team would face off against intra-state rival Cincinnati but saw few signs that fan excitement had notched up. Clusters of students strolled across the broad quadrangle--inexplicably named "The Oval." Wandering around, I saw hundreds of other students moving into dormitories and off-campus apartments, getting the school year under way.

"The football excitement will pick up later in the season," Sandy Davis, owner of the 50 Lincoln Inn, told me on Friday morning. "Besides, this isn't a big game," she said. "They're playing a warm-up--the Cincinnati School for Girls, or something."

Even so, I couldn't buy a ticket on the Internet or over the phone, so I asked a kindly OSU press representative to hold a seat for me in the stadium press box.

The kickoff, slated for noon, meant traffic clogged highways by 10 a.m. When I finally reached the stadium area, tailgate parties already approached beer-and-brat critical mass. Tents, barbecue grills, boom boxes, silver kegs and inflatable Brutus Buckeye figures (designed 40 years ago to personify the team mascot) littered lawns and parking lots. People played catch with footballs and tossed beanbags at wooden targets.

Almost everyone wore red, except a few who chose white, the Ohio State road jersey and an acceptable substitute. Most of those garments bore the number of a favorite player. This was a Columbus I hadn't yet seen--acres of cars, smoke in the air, incessant noise, red clothes and fervid devotion to a bunch of heroes who might not stick around long enough to graduate.

It felt as if the whole city had flocked to the banks of the Olen-tangy River as people made their way along Woody Hayes Drive (named for a late, lamented coach) toward the field of play. "There it is,

son," said a red-shirted man to the little boy (red shirt No. 7) holding his hand. "There?" said the boy, pointing toward the towering concrete walls. "Yes, son, there."

Ohio Stadium holds 102,000 spectators, and most had taken their seats by 11:55, when The Best Damn Band in the Land, as it's called, marched onto the field. An egregiously high-stepping drum major, sporting a red jacket and a tall, white plumed hat, led the way. At one point, he bent over backwards so far that his hat touched the ground (cheers). After that, he tossed his baton in the air and muffed the catch (scattered boos).

The black-uniformed band broke into two sections, one facing the east grandstand and the other facing the west. Musicians marched through elaborate twirls and snaking formations, until their bodies formed perfect cursive "Ohio's" on either side of the field. Then, with showboating shakes and wiggles, two sousaphone players dotted each of the i's.

These rituals plucked at the emotions. Even I could feel it. Some kind of horn blasted whenever the visiting team--a respectable University of Cincinnati squad, by the way--faced a third down. From time to time, clusters of Buckeye fans would yell "OH!" and others would respond "I-O!" I suppose this sort of thing takes on added importance when your mascot's a form of horse chestnut.

Ohio State won, 37-7, befitting its ranking as No. 1 in the nation. I imagine the post-game Victory Bell rang, too, but by then I had moved on. So much of Columbus remained to be seen.

Anyone seeking respite from football frenzy could do worse than spend time in the Columbus Museum of Art, where headliners on the scorecard include Degas, Matisse, Monet, Picasso, Renoir, Hopper and Cassatt. In all, a fine survey of late-19th and early-20th Century genius. The museum also holds the largest public collections of works by two Columbus luminaries, painter George Bellows and primitive woodcarver extraordinaire Elijah Pierce.

As soon as I heard about it, I had to see Topiary Park. Lots of cities boast sports teams, museums and zoos, but I would bet no other town has a reproduction of Georges Seurat's "A Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of La Grand Jatte" fashioned from skillfully trimmed yew shrubs. You know the painting. It hangs in the Art Institute of Chicago and shows French people lounging on a riverbank. A close look reveals that Seurat daubed the whole thing with tiny dots of color.

The Topiary Park designer, James T. Mason, teaches sculpture at the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department Cultural Arts Center. In 1989, he built the metal frames for the project--people, top hats, umbrellas, hoop skirts, etc.--then supervised the planting of the yew vines that would cover them. Life sized green figures now adorn the banks of a pond in the seven-acre park--54 people, eight boats, three dogs, a monkey and a cat, according to the gift-shop brochure.

I didn't count them myself, because I became so enthralled with the whole prospect of it, a landscape aping a painting of a landscape. Adding to the oasis-like quality so near a bustling downtown, real people lounged on the grass, napped on park benches or played with dogs and cats of their own. Ohio State's football fortunes seemed to be the furthest thing from their minds.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

Chicago to Columbus airfares on various Internet travel sites start around \$120 round trip for an arbitrary departure on Nov. 16 and returning Nov. 19 (the weekend Ohio State plays arch rival Michigan). Fares subject to change. Driving is another possibility. Figure on about 320 miles and six hours from Chicago.

GETTING AROUND

Buses cover most major routes for \$1.50 a ride or \$3.50 for an all-day pass. Taxis charge \$2.75 for the first 1/9 mile and 45 cents for each additional 2/9 mile. That adds up fast. For convenience, a rental car works best.

STAYING THERE

As you might expect, most major brands are represented. For variety's sake, I stayed first at the 50 Lincoln Inn (50 E. Lincoln St.; 800-827-4203; www.columbus-bed-breakfast.com/50lincoln/index.htm). It's a 19th Century brick house converted to an eight-unit bed-and-breakfast with lots of Short North artsy attractions within walking distance. Each room features an artist as theme-setter. I got Monet, which meant some pleasing prints on the walls to go with the vaguely French Provincial furniture. Theme for breakfast in the big, old-fashioned dining room: All-American bacon-and-eggs. \$119 plus tax.

Next, I booked a room downtown at The Lofts Hotel (55 E. Nationwide Blvd.; 800-735-6387; www.55lofts.com). Its marketers like to call it a "hotel with style," so expect 44 severely modern rooms tucked into a former warehouse. You'd hardly know it's a "sister" to the Crowne Plaza next door. Furniture was a little on the Ikea side with a lot of gray to match the immense steel beams and pipes that run across the high ceiling. Unlike the average hotel or B&B room, the unit featured an extremely long desk, two tall windows, a comfortable chair for reading and a hospital-style TV bolted high on the wall. Frette did the linens and Aveda the toiletries. \$229.

DINING THERE

Do gourmets make pilgrimages to Columbus? Maybe so if they want to try the creations of Hartmut Handke. The frequent gold-medal-winning chef serves up delicious fare in cavernous dining rooms below sidewalk level in the Brewery District. Handke's Cuisine (520 S. Front St.; 614-621-2500; www.chefhandke.com), in a former brewery itself, has been fitted with dark wood and soft lighting befitting a menu that somebody staying at a hotel with style would surely appreciate. I got a kick out of Handke's take on Cajun oysters in a barbecue sauce, lobster bisque and smoked pork loin with braised cabbage, white asparagus and chive potato mousseline. Entrees range from about \$22 to \$30.

L'Antibes (772 N. High St., suite 106; 614-291-1666; www.lantibes.com) sits bashfully alongside a string of shops and galleries in the Short North Arts District. Inside, the French menu gets assertive and delicious with veal sweetbreads a specialty, and lamb, duck, salmon, pheasant and scallops all handled with a delicate touch. My own choice: ostrich steak with escargot for starters. Tres bon. Entrees from \$25 to \$36.

It pays to explore and ask around. Little one-of-a-kind eateries with imaginative cuisine are scattered here and there, not all of them listed in official guides (see Information). Of course, the major chains maintain Columbus outposts, many of them at Easton Town Center.

INFORMATION

Experience Columbus, the marketing arm of the Columbus Convention and Visitors Bureau, is at 90 N. High St., Columbus, OH 43215; 800-354-2657; www.experiencecolumbus.com. The Web site packs in plenty of useful information and so does the Official Visitors Guide published by the CCVB. However, not every business in the city takes out a membership and therefore might not be listed.

Also scope out useful information on the City of Columbus Web site: www.columbus.gov.

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